This week's community profile: Gills Rock

Awaiting summer: Charlie Voight, commercial fisherman/fish vendor and owner of Charlie's Smokehouse, stands outside his business in Gills Rock. The boat is used for trips to Washington Island.

Like solitude? Here's the place

By Casey Cain
Press-Gazette

Gills Rock isn't an easy place to make a living, but it's an easy place to live.

"You've got to work like a dog to make it work," says Roger Johnson, 12702 Wisconsin 42.

"But it's a heck of a place to raise kids," adds the construction contractor, who was born and raised in Gills Rock.

Press-Gazette photos by John Roemer

"And where else can you go out and look at scenery like that," he says, pointing out his windows at the miles-wide view of stark trees, rocky shoreline and ice floes that will soon turn to crashing waves and abundant greenery.

Roger's son, Rick, 850 Wisconsin 42, a commercial fisherman, estimates that 95 percent of the residents are self-employed, so few residents work only eight-hour days.

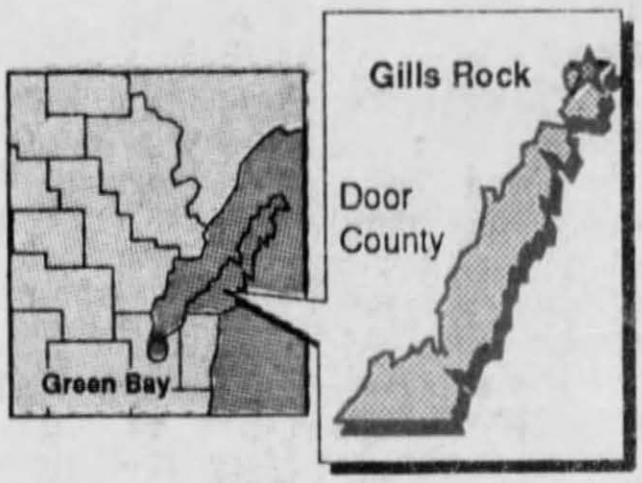
But older residents find time to help the next generation.

"They're always willing to give you good advice, and they don't treat you like a kid," he says. "It's not dog-eat-dog."

Located at the tip of the Door County peninsula, Gills Rock was called Hedgehog Harbor until 1902. That name wouldn't fit on the cancellation stamp for the new post office, so the postmaster renamed the community after founder Elias Gill.

That postmaster's grandson, Charlie Voight, provides fish to many local fish boils. He also owns and operates the Island Clipper and Yankee Clipper ferries.

"Gills Rock is a nice place," says Voight, owner of Charlie's Smokehouse. "It's peaceful in the winter, and there are enough people around in the summer."



Gills Rock appeals to people who enjoy nature and solitude, says James Grasse, who grew up within four miles of Gills Rock and is town chairman of Liberty Grove.

Sam Subin started visiting Gills Rock in 1934 and moved from Chicago in 1947. He says the climate is never too drastic, the residents are nice, the forest surroundings are beautiful and he likes being close to the water.

The difference between Gills Rock and Chicago is a lot more than size, he says.

"The people were so much different, they were friendly and they took you for what you were worth," says Subin, who owns the Maple Grove Motel. "And of course there's no stress up here."

Subin says he once used his Chicago connections to encourage tourism to Door County. But he and other residents hope Gills Rock will never be as highly developed as some other villages along the bay shore.

Gloria Johnson, Roger's wife, says Gills Rock has benefited from the slow influx of newcomers.

"We've had some very nice people move here and settle — many well-educated people who give freely of their time and talent," she says.

Robert Weisser, 810 Wisconsin 42, said he expects slow growth for the next 10 or 15 years, but the tourists are important.

"I'm happy to see them every spring," Weisser says. "It means another year in which I'll make a living."

Weisser and his family moved to Gills Rock from Milwaukee 14 years ago. He serves on the town board and runs a landscaping business.

The local lifestyle isn't for everybody, but there's an easy secret to a good life here, Weisser says: "Catch big fish on little rods. There's plenty of fish."

The Gills Rock file

- **Location:** Northern tip of Door County, in town of Liberty Grove
- **Population:** 100 to 200 permanent residents, plus many seasonal residents
- **Main businesses:** Commercial fishing, ferry service, tourist accommodations
- **Activities:** Summer and winter fishing, hiking, boating, snowmobiling

■ **Next week:** Norman in Kewaunee Co.

Here 45 years: Sam Subin, owner of the Maple Grove Motel, started visiting Gills Rock in 1934 and moved from Chicago in 1947. He says he enjoys the surroundings and being close to the water.

Hometown proud: Roger Johnson, 12702 Wisconsin 42, and his wife, Gloria, raised a family here.